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THE DEAD BRIDAL.
A VENETIAN TALE OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY.

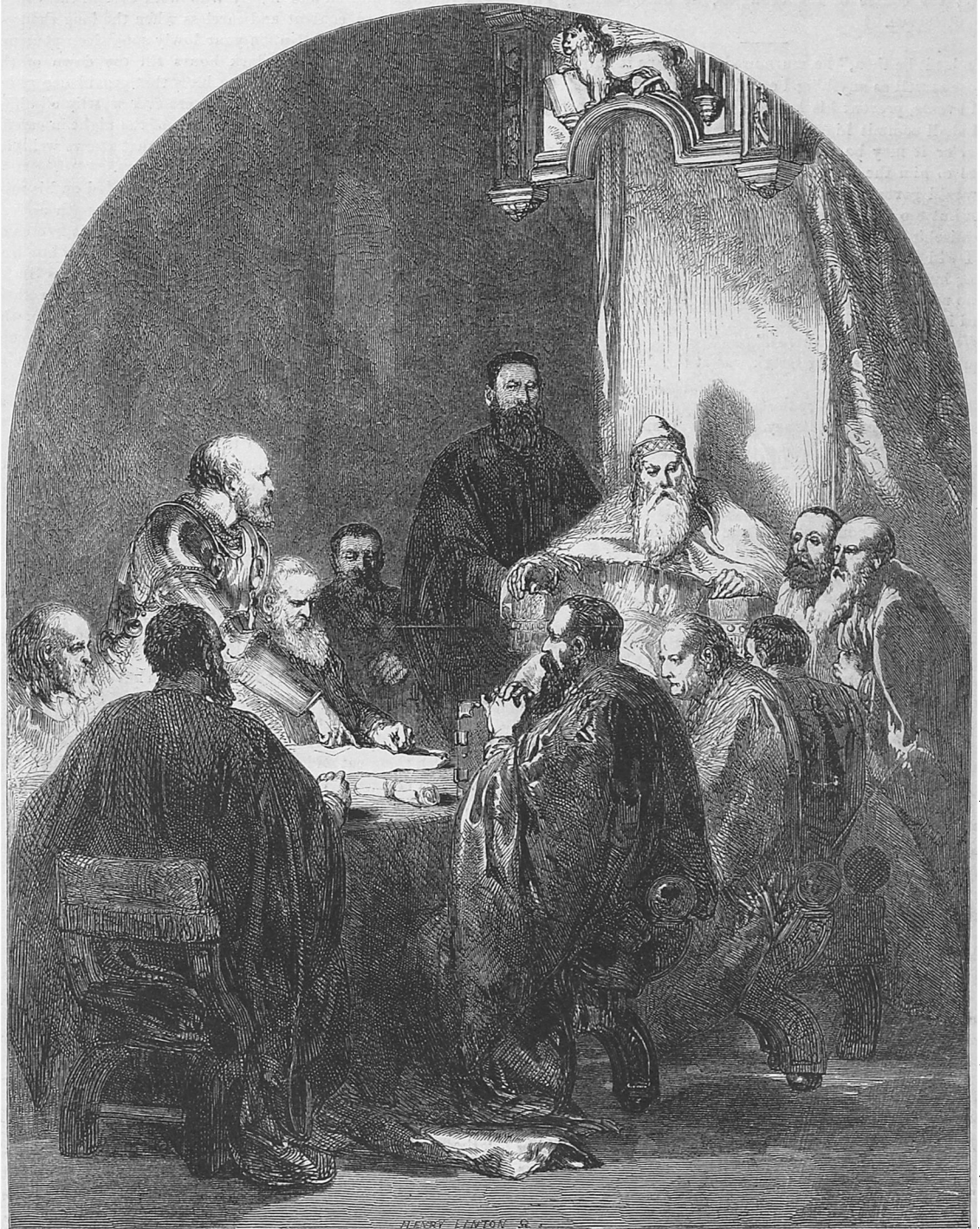
BY JONATHAN FREKE SLINGSBY.

CHAPTER IX.

Officer—"Most worthy signior,
The duke's in council; and your noble self,
I'm sure, is sent for."

Brabantio—"How! the duke in council
At this time of night!"—*Shakspeare.*

We have been a long time absent from the Camp at Palestrina: a season, and those with whom we have been engaged there.
let us now return thither, though we must leave fair Venice for Our readers will remember that the third chapter of this our



ZENO AND ROBERTO DI RECANATI BEFORE THE COUNCIL.

most veracious history closed with the interview which had taken place between the Venetian general, Zeno, and the good English knight, Sir William Cheke, or Checco, as the Italians called him.

Zeno, as we said, passed into an inner apartment. It was evidently one in which he had secured for himself that perfect privacy which was necessary for a man who had such heavy responsibilities imposed upon him, and who had constant need for deliberation with his own mind to sustain him in his stern course against those who opposed and thwarted him. Flinging himself upon the rude couch, which served as his bed, he surrendered his mind to contemplation, protracted and to all appearance perplexing. At length, he half arose, and continuing the course of his thoughts, he unconsciously gave them utterance.

"So let it be then," he murmured, "perhaps it may suit my purpose as well as anything I could have devised. I shall thus, at all events, prevent his keeping his appointment to-night; and I shall commit him, if possible, to adopt some course of action, or it may be to disclose his own. It is true, I shall expose to him the dissensions and weaknesses of those who fain would govern our State; but I am much mistaken if he be not but too well acquainted with these things already, and so no mischief can result from his being present at the council. Yes, I will even take upon myself the responsibility of summoning him."

Zeno now arose, and stepping across the room to the door, opened it and called—

"Who waits without there?"

In a moment the young Greek was at the door: the general beckoned him to enter.

"Thou hast been through the camp since sun-down, Alexis?"

"So please your excellency I have. I am but just now returned."

"Is all tranquil?"

"As the grave, signore; save the sentinels and those who were preparing to relieve the guards there is no one astir."

"Tis well. Thou knowest the quarters of the Italian lances that are under the command of Recanati?"

"Assuredly, eccellenza."

"What is the time now?"

"It wants about two hours of midnight, signore."

"Good. Fetch me now the means of writing."

The youth speedily brought the requisites, and Zeno wrote a few lines, which he folded and delivered to Alexis.

"Thou shalt take this to the condottiere without delay, and bear back to me his reply. And mark, good youth; I know thee to be true and faithful, and as sharp of eye as thou art true of heart."

The boy replied not, save by bowing silently and pressing his hand upon his bosom.

"Aye," continued his master, comprehending all which the gesture of the young Greek was meant to convey—"Aye, I know it well, Alexis. Well then, thou shalt take good note of all thou seest and hearest. Watch the face of this Roberto as he reads what thou givest to him; and heed the manner of his words more than the words themselves, for he is one of those who knows how to conceal a deep and deadly meaning beneath specious language. And now for thy mission, good youth, for time is speeding, and I have much to prepare ere I meet the council an hour hence."

The youth placed the paper within the folds of his vest and left the apartment; while Zeno proceeded to unlock a box strongly bound with iron, whence he took forth various papers, apparently military reports and others of a more secret character. Over some of these he paused and pondered long, and one who could have seen him at his solitary and absorbing employment, and marked now the dark shadow crossing his brow, now the scornful smile curling his lip, might easily divine that he was penetrating the mazes of some devious scheme, and detecting the meshes that a wily hand was laying around his path to ensnare him.

In such occupations and thoughts we shall leave him. It

would be bootless to follow his speculations; they would, even had we the power and the will to investigate them, only exhibit one of those chapters of toilsome and perplexing meditation which is the lot of every great spirit in every age—the penalty which they must ever pay who would seek to govern their fellow-men. Let the humble and the unambitious account themselves happy in that they are not solicited by those overmastering and passionate aspirations for greatness, which urge irresistibly forward those who in every age are doomed to fill the fore-front of the world's panorama,—beings to look upon and wonder at, with their brows glorified by fame, and their proportions magnified beyond ordinary humanity by the light that shines upon them; but, ah! not to be envied or imitated. Oh ye thrice-blessed and happy who walk ever in the valleys of life, lie down content and careless when the long shadows of the coming night fall upon your lowly cots, sleep your unbroken sleep through the dark hours till the dawn of the morning; and as ye arise in peace, bless that providence which casts not your lot amongst those who are ever wearily climbing up the hill sides, who keep the watches of the night in careful vigils, and the hours of the day in toil, that strews wrinkles upon the brow and plants sorrows in the heart.

In the meanwhile the young Greek proceeded on his mission through the camp at Palestrina, and at length arrived at the place assigned to Roberto Recanati and his free companions, a body of one hundred lances and about four hundred foot soldiers, chiefly Italians, picked up in the various States of the north of Italy, and now banded together under their wily leader. While throughout all the other portions of the encampment the utmost tranquillity and repose were perceptible, Alexis, as he approached the condottiere's quarters, at once became aware that some movement was in preparation. The clank of mail and the heavy tread of armed men at intervals sounded upon his ear, and lights passed to and fro in the darkness. Replying to the sentinel's challenge at the out-post, he soon found himself amongst the soldiers of Recanati, and perceived that a portion of them were equipped in their armour and others were making preparations as if for marching.

"How comes it that you are stirring to-night comrade?" inquired Alexis of one of the soldiers.

"Diavolo!" replied the man grumblingly. "I know not how it comes, save that it pleases our valiant capitano to take the watch at the redoubt next Chioggia to-night: we have more night-work, I think, than justly falls to our share; besides, it is out of our turn now; we should have had the watch last evening instead of those English porkers of Checco's."

"Ah, che porchi sono questi Inglesi!" added the Italian contemptuously. "Si fanno nienti che mangiare e dormire 'tis ever with them eat and sleep, eat and sleep, except when they drink. Per bacco! they are not bad either at the pottle-pot, these Englishers."

"Nor at the gisarme or the battle-axe either, comrade," added Alexis. "I've seen them fight as well as drink, amico mio, and I trow if they have hard heads they have stout hearts likewise."

The Italian was about to reply angrily, if one might judge from his raised arm and the imprecation with which he commenced; but Alexis cut the retort short by saying

"Well, I can't stay gossiping with you, comrade. I must see your captain, as I bear a message to him from his excellency the general. Where shall I find him?"

The soldier pointed in the direction of Recanati's quarters and made no further reply.

"Buona notte compare," said the youth, as he passed forward to the place indicated.

"Thou mayst spare thyself that wish," grumbled the soldier, "the night is never good, to my thinking, when one has to watch through it, without wine-cup or dice-board."

At the front of his tent, beside which a watch-fire was burning with fitful gleaming, stood Roberto di Recanati. He was fully armed in a suit of Milanese plate-mail, with the exception of his helmet, which lay near him upon a stool.

As the light played upon his figure and lit up his face, which the *camail de fer* left exposed, one could form a fair estimate of his outward appearance. He was tall and rather slight in figure; and, judging from the portions of his legs and arms which were not covered by the mail, you perceived at once that he was singularly muscular, though the reverse of fat. His face was thin and pallid, in the centre of which rose a straight slight nose. Thin, bloodless lips were compressed closely together, so that they rarely opened sufficiently to show the white teeth within them. His pale forehead was terminated below by the lines of two straight dark bushy eyebrows, beneath which glittered a pair of small but keen black eyes, sunk deeply within their sockets and moving with a constant and restless motion, which never suffered them to dwell steadily and at length upon any one with whom he conversed. Upon the whole it needed but little physiognomical skill to feel that the owner of that face was neither an ordinary character, nor one whom a stranger would be very strongly attracted to. There was about those features, at once an expression of determination and yet of wiliness that impressed you with the conviction, that the man was one who would be as crafty to conceive the mode of compassing as he would be persevering to accomplish any object which his subtle and unscrupulous mind once determined upon.

As the messenger from Zeno approached the person whom we have been just describing, this latter was occupied apparently in examining one of those square-headed darts or *quarreaux*, as they were called, which at that period were much used by the arbalists or cross-bow men, of whom the Genoese were the most skilful in Europe. What the subject of his meditation was, as he curiously examined the shaft, it would not be easy to speculate upon; but, at all events, one would be disposed to suspect that whatever share the weapon in his hand might have with his thoughts, it could scarcely be worthy of the thorough engrossment of mind which now plainly pre-occupied the condottiere. Indeed, so complete was his abstraction that he did not notice the approach of Alexis till the latter had almost reached his side and accosted him somewhat abruptly.

"From his excellency Zeno," said the lad, holding forth the folded paper.

Recanati started at the sound of Zeno's name; a faint flush passed over his pallid features, and his restless eye gleamed quick and penetratingly at the person who had just addressed him. There was something of a disconcerted manner about him, which a keen observer would have pronounced to be just such as one would display whose secret thoughts had been suddenly revealed to him who was the subject of them. But the expression of any such feeling was only momentary, and ere it could have been well remarked upon, it had passed away; yet not so quickly had it passed as to escape the notice of him who stood before the condottiere—for no keener observer ever scanned features or detected their secret meaning than the young Greek, whose native sagacity had been sharpened by years of captivity and precarious existence. Calmly and coldly the Italian captain received the billet, and perused its short contents to the end. Alexis, as he watched his countenance, fancied—but it might only be fancy, conjured up by the play of the flickering firelight—that the dark, straight, eyebrows almost met upon the pale forehead; and that the thin lips quivered slightly as they became more compressed, but no other indication could be detected of the effect which the note had upon the reader; if, indeed, it had any effect at all. At length Recanati said, in a quiet measured voice,

"His excellency does me an unwonted honour. At what hour does the council meet?"

"An hour before midnight, signore."

"And it is now not far from that. Tell the general that I shall not fail to attend, though it may somewhat interfere with my duty to the republic. For this, however, I make no doubt his excellency will provide."

Recanati methodically and very slowly folded up the paper and put it into his pouch, and then, turning on his heel, entered the tent. The young Greek made an inclination of

the head as taking his departure, but ere he passed beyond the precincts of the tent, he turned his head quickly round and cast a hurried glance towards its interior. At this instant, a log of wood that lay upon the watch-fire, suddenly fell from its place into the smouldering ashes and burst into a momentary flame. The light shot into the recesses of the tent, and disclosed to the practised eye of the Greek, the form of Recanati, as he hastily divided the shaft of the arrow lengthwise and closed it up again as quickly.

A low laugh escaped from the lips of the Greek—so low that one a yard removed would scarcely have heard it, and then he murmured as if to himself

"Ha! I thought as much. That bolt *may* slay indeed, but it slays not him at whom it is discharged."

CHAPTER X.

"And he was cladde in cote and hode of grene,
A shefe of peacock arwes bright and kene
Under his belt he bore ful thriftilie,
Well coude he dresse his takel yewmanlie;
His arwes drouped not with fetheres lowe,
And in his hand he bare a mightie bowe,
Upon his arme he had a gai bracer,
And by his side a sword and a bokeler,
And on the other side a gai daggere,
Harneised wel, and sharp as pointe of spere."—*Chaucer*.

"As for my country I have shed my blood,
Not fearing outward force, so shall my lungs
Coin words, till their decay against those measles,
Which we disdain, shall tetter us."—*Shakespeare*.

It might have been about half-an-hour after the scene which we have described in the preceding chapter, that an armed soldier walked to and fro before the massive doorway of one of the interior buildings at the fort of Palestrina. The night was moonless, but the stars shone out to relieve the darkness which fell upon the earth. From time to time the sentinel, as he reached the limit of his short march and turned round to retrace his steps, stopped a moment to look up into the heavens.

There is something about a starlit sky that irresistibly draws the attention and fixes the gaze of every mortal, no matter how unimaginative his nature or unpoetic his temperament. I have known very worthy and sensible people—people who were by no means insensible to natural beauties—walk a live long day and scarcely ever turn their eyes to the sun, looking all the time steadily before them, aye and pride themselves upon that very excellent habit of "always looking before them," and, perhaps, they were right. Then there's the moon; what can be more lovely to look upon? Nothing. And yet they who look very long at the moon are somehow apt to get into disrepute with wise folks, so that "to have an affair with the moon," is very detrimental to a man's character—the very best that will be said of you is, that you are a mope or a lover—you may, however, get a reputation infinitely less agreeable, one which may endanger your personal liberty, and bring you into acquaintance with the chancellor. Therefore the moon is to be looked at in moderation, which indeed is all that any sensible person does. But starlight—who can resist the tender, solemn, silent influence of a sky full of stars, especially at midnight. You look up into heaven, and you see a thousand eyes gazing down upon you with a fascination that entralls you, and turn away your eyes as you will, some strange inscrutable spell forces you quickly to lift them again and commune with those glittering orbs, as you would commune with the deep, speaking eyes of a woman, when the heart would endure no other language. Yes, the spell of a star-thronged heaven is irresistible. Your attention is not confined to one great planet that wearies with its sameness, but you are solicited by a myriad of bright things that speak to you, oh how solemnly, of worlds without number, of space without limit, of time without an ending, and so you lose yourself in that lustrous company and know not how to withdraw from their presence.

I am very certain that the worthy fellow who kept watch and ward upon the fine spring night, in the year of God 1380, at the fort of Palestrina, pursued no such train of philosophising upon star-gazing as that which I have just now ventured to give to you, dear reader; but certain I am that he gazed and gazed again and again upon the "multitude of the heavenly host" that looked down so holily upon him. And the sight of those stars brought back fresh and tenderly upon his heart the thoughts of his old home and of that land whence he many a time and oft looked upon those same stars, as he lay in the greenwood o' nights and watched the deer trip out of the covert and browse in the star-lighted glade, till they came within reach of his long-bow shaft. A bold fellow was Hodge o' the Hill, I wot, as any that strayed along the shaws upon the Trent side in merry England. His equipment proclaimed him at once to be an English archer. In his hand he carried a pike; at his back was slung his trusty long-bow, beside which was a leathern case filled with some score arrows, light and well-feathered; upon his arm he wore a bracer, to protect his sleeve from being cut by the bowstring, and on his hand was a shooting-glove. Beside these, he had the brigardine, or little coat of plate; a skull, or *hufkyn* as it was called; and a maule or mallet of lead, five feet long. On one side he carried his sword and buckler, on the other a dagger and a hook; while from a baldric of green leather was slung a bugle such as foresters use. Such was the goodly English yeoman, Roger Harrington, or Hodge of the Hill, as he was once known in his own shire, before an irrepressible love for vert and venison led him to violate the privileges of park and chase, and drove him an outlaw to seek his fortune in foreign lands, and serve as a soldier beneath the banner of his adventurous countryman, Cheke. And so Hodge now paced backward and forward, and gazed upon the stars, and ever and anon sang to himself a snatch of some well-remembered old ballad of his own Albion to keep him company.

"Lythe and lysten, gentylmen,
That be of free-bore blode;
I shall you tell of a good yeman,
Hys name was Robyn Hode.
Robyn was a proude out-lawe,
Whyles he walked on groundes;
So curteyse an out-lawe as he was one,
Was never none yfounde."

"Ah, well-a-day!" resumed Hodge, after a pause, "these were merry times, when Robin roamed through the forest of Sherwood, and none dare question his right to strike down a fat buck in the chase, or kiss a pretty wench in the greenwood. A plague upon your forest laws, say I; if every honest fellow had fair play, by my hallidom, Hodge o' the Hill, thou wouldst now be watching the hinds in the parks of merry England, and not pacing the barren sands of an outlandish island. Who goes there—ho!"

This interrogatory, with which the archer's soliloquy was concluded, was uttered in a loud and peremptory tone, and addressed to one who approached to the entrance of the building where the Englishman was keeping guard.

"A friend," was the reply; "one who attends the council."

"Your name," demanded the archer bluntly. "I have got my orders strictly, and must know who I am to let pass—your name, if it please you."

"Roberto di Recanati."

"All right, signor; pass in."

Recanati passed the sentinel, and disappeared within the interior of the building. The archer looked after him for a moment, and then said, in an under tone, "Aye, I know thy cut well enough—a whey-faced fellow, by Saint George. Look you now, one good yeoman of Nottingham, with a stout quarter-staff, would thresh a score of such foreigners. Ah, by my fay, there's nothing like the nut-brown ale and the ox beef of Old England—heigho!"

"The woodweele sang and wold not cease,
Sitting upon the spraye,
So lowde, he awakened Robyn Hode
In the greenwoode where he laye."

Recanati passed through an antechamber and entered a large apartment. It was scantily furnished, and but partially lighted by a lamp that burned upon a large table which stood in the centre of the room, thus leaving the more distant parts of the chamber in comparative gloom. Around the table sat several persons, some in the long robes worn by the senators and high officials of the republic, others in armour or military costume. At the upper end of the table sat the venerable old doge, Andrea Contarini, his head covered with the horned bonnet, and his white beard falling down upon his ducal robe. Immediately beside him was a personage whose dark and stern countenance well accorded with the robe in which he was clothed. It was entirely of black camlet, without the relief of ornament or colour; and he too, like the doge, was covered, for on his head was a low round bonnet of black felt. This was one of the council of ten, *I Dieci*, or, as they were called from the hue of their robes, *I Neri*. There was no power more absolute or more dreaded in the Venetian state than that which this body now exercised—for as yet the terrible and secret tribunal of the state inquisition, known as "the council of three," had not been instituted. The council of ten, when originally convoked, about fifty years previous to the period of which we are writing, was limited in duration to ten days; but their period of office was, from time to time, increased, till now the members were elected for life. Nominally a criminal court, they were, in reality, invested with the most plenary power, and being exempt from all responsibility and appeal, they virtually exercised an absolute authority over every person and everything in the state. Even the doge himself was not beyond the reach of this potent tribunal. It hesitated not to countermand his orders, as it did those of the grand council; to depose him, and even to put him to death. Rarely, indeed, was the chief magistrate suffered to take part in any state affairs, or exercise the functions of his office without the presence and interference of one of the council of ten, nominally for the purpose of advising, but in reality with the object of controlling all his power, and acting the spy upon his actions and his conduct, which were duly reported to the rest of the council. At the opposite side of Contarini there were seated two men in red robes, but with their heads uncovered. These were members of the senate, or *signoria*, and were known by the appellation of *I Rossi*, and were, in fact, recently added to the council of ten, for the purpose of assisting them whenever the emergency of state affairs rendered their advice necessary. In addition to these were seated, at either side, three or four ordinary members of the senate who had accompanied the doge to Palestrina. These comprised the civilians who were in attendance at the council; beyond them were two men in military costume. The one we have already endeavoured to make our readers acquainted with, and therefore, needs not be further described—the general of the land forces, Carlo Zeno; the other was a man of a singularly noble presence and bearing, full of dignity, yet was there not in that dignity the slightest tincture of pride or arrogance; on the contrary, his face was indicative of a gentleness and long-suffering, that bordered on humility, and bore many marks of sorrow and trial which made him look old beyond his years, while the gray hairs that fell down his neck and mingled in his beard, made these years appear even more numerous still. This was Vittorio Pisani who now, since the arrival of Zeno, had devoted himself to the duties of admiral of the fleet. Perhaps history affords fewer instances of the ingratitude of popular governments, and the instability of popular favour, than is presented to us in the life of this great and good man. More than once the saviour of his country, each service rendered by him to the state was sure to be speedily followed by insult, degradation, or even imprisonment, and yet each act of ingratitude or injury was but the precursor of new supplications for his aid, and found him, marvellous to relate, as ready as ever to forget all that he had suffered—to remember nothing but that his country needed his services, and to render those services with the prompt and uncalculating instinct of filial love.